

RELIGION AND THE SENSE OF ETHICS IN ANCIENT JAPAN: ANALYSIS OF THE BUDDHIST WORLDVIEW BASED ON *THE TALE OF GENJI* **

*Hyosook Kim**

Abstract: This paper explores expressions found in the novel *The Tale of Genji* to analyse the lives of people during the Heian period. It has such strong Buddhist undertones that it is considered impossible to have been written without Buddhist thought. In examining how the work portrays Buddhism, the characters faced with death uniformly want to become monks/nuns, but although they do, not a single one attains paradise. On the contrary, many characters are tormented in the afterlife despite having become monks/nuns after long periods of suffering. As it reveals a paradox in which there is a deep-rooted belief in Buddhism with humans who are anxious and do not fully believe in salvation through faith, the novel offers a realistic critique of Buddhism by ancient humans who came to experience the latter days of Buddhism.

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* Hyosook Kim is Assistant Professor *Department of Japanese Language and Literature, Sejong University, Seoul, KOREA*. She investigates the dynamics of exchanges between Korea and Japan, examining literature from classical Japanese works to modern texts, and exploring how perceptions of these exchanges have evolved over time. Her publications include the book "Words and Foreign Lands in The Tale of Genji (源氏物語の言葉と異国, 2010)" and the article "A Genealogy of Tiger Nationalism in Korea: Post-Colonial Discourse, Ch'oe Namsŏn, and the Seoul Olympics" (2023, co-authored with Rebekah Clements and Rhyu Mina).

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1. Introduction

Buddhism, as a major religion throughout Asia, has had a major ongoing influence on society in general, starting from its genesis with the birth of the Buddha in the 6th century B.C. Buddhism's solid, unwavering status as an important societal influence makes it an essential element in considering various cultural phenomena in modern-day Asia. This was even more evident in ancient times, when Buddhism served as the absolute authority over numerous affairs of daily life. Buddhism was first introduced to Japan, located at the edge of Asia, a thousand years after the birth of the Buddha. As it spread westward from India to China, and from Japan throughout the Korean Peninsula, differences in space and time allowed the faith to evolve deeply (Osumi A 26). Ancient Japan accepted Buddhism a thousand years after Buddha was born, but they were afraid that Japan would not be saved because it was distant from India, the place where Buddha's teachings originated. This caused their faith in Buddhism to deepen.

China and the Korean Peninsula had a great influence on Japanese culture in the pre-Heian Era. In the Heian Era (792–1185), Japan's intrinsic culture began to blossom. Independent writing of Buddhist texts, as well the recording of scriptures received from China and the Korean Peninsula began to take place in Japan. The Japanese people of this time believed that the principles of birth, old age, sickness, and death—the four phases of human life—were all related to the Buddha. Many people therefore turned to Buddhism, hoping to escape their suffering, and to receive the promise of rebirth in the paradise of the afterlife. On the other hand, the fact that ancient Japanese came to devote themselves to Buddhism reflects a life of suffering, regrets of past sins, and a sense of unease and anxiety about the afterlife. If this is the case, what is the relationship between the inner worlds of the Japanese people of the Heian period and the religion of Buddhism? Through a literary analysis of the novel *The Tale of Genji*, which candidly depicts the lives and sorrows of aristocrats at the time, this paper attempts to shed light on the religious life

of Japanese people during the Heian era and their accompanying sense of ethics.

2. The Buddhism of the Heian Era and *The Tale of Genji*

In the Heian era, the tenets of the latter days of Buddhism had a deep influence on both religious life and people's daily lives. The tenets form a kind of eschatology in which enlightenment—gained by practicing the Buddha's teachings after his death—gradually decreases with the passage of time, eventually bringing about the decline of the Dharma, or the law preached by the Buddha. The Dharma disappears after three periods: (1) enlightenment is achieved by practicing the Buddha's teachings; (2) enlightenment is not achieved despite practice; and (3) only the teachings exist, without people to practice them, thereby making enlightenment impossible. The last of these three periods is known as the latter days of Buddhism, which is said to last for 10,000 years; opinions differ on the length of time regarding the first and second periods. Some interpretations say that they should both last for 1,000 years, while others say that the first is 500 years, with the second being 1,000 years.

In Japan, the Buddhist monk Saichō (767–822), who returned to his home country from China's Tang Dynasty, accepted the theory that both the first and second periods span 1,000 years. According to this theory, in 1000 A.D., when Japanese culture flourished the most, the nation was only around 50 years away from the beginning of the final period. Because of this, the Japanese of this time became even more devoted to Buddhism than in the previous era. Of particular importance is how the Japanese came to regard the tenets of the latter days of Buddhism not as a simple religious theory, but as real ideas that had a direct relationship with human life. Originally, this belief was meant to guard against the neglect of Buddhist practitioners, but when the social order collapsed and inequalities were uncovered around the middle of the Heian era, the interpretation that the final period would soon be underway began to become prevalent in the broader Japanese society (Osumi B 969).

The people of the Heian period were overwhelmed with the anxiety and fear that, even if they would not experience it first-hand, their children and grandchildren would live in the final

period. Because of this, they became deeply devoted to Buddhism in the hopes of attaining salvation. People expressed their faith in Buddhism in various ways. For example, to prepare for the oncoming final period, many people held numerous Buddhist events and decided to become monks. In addition, texts such as *Ōjōyōshū* (*The Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land*), *Nihon ōjyō Gokurakuki* (*Japanese Records of Birth into the Pure Land*), and *Sanbō ekotoba* (*Illustrations and Explanations of the Three Jewels*) were published (Misumi 7–8). Through the activity of writing, which spreads the Dharma, people attempted to save themselves and also to guide readers toward the path of the Buddha. These texts are important resources for modern research on Japanese Buddhism in that they provide a glimpse into contemporary Buddhist beliefs. However, they depict an idealist's conception of Buddhism and do not express the devotion that the Heian people actually had for Buddhism, nor their thoughts on religion in light of the final period, nor their authentic attitudes and actions. In order to examine the actual perceptions that the Heian people had of Buddhism, it is necessary to analyse the texts that reveal, without omission, the inaccuracies of the complex inner worlds of humans living in that reality – not an idealist interpretation.

During the Heian era, many works were written in hiragana, characters unique to Japan, rather than kanji or hanja, which was used as a universal written language in East Asia at the time. One of these works written in hiragana is the world-renowned novel *The Tale of Genji* (*Genjimonogatari*). Japan's 2000 yen note features some scenes from the novel and a portrait of Murasaki Shikibu, the novelist and lady-in-waiting of the royal court who wrote the book, making it a significant work of classical literature as well as a symbol of Japanese culture itself. As such, countless people from around the globe have read it, beginning with its English translation in 1882 and subsequent translations into about 20 languages to date (HEIAN Literature Overseas). Furthermore, the novel is constantly reproduced in other media such as cartoons, animation, films, and plays, and is considered to be the zenith of Japanese culture. How does *The Tale of Genji* have such a large readership that it is seen as a quintessential work in Japanese culture? This can be explained by, unlike other works of

its time, the novel's sharp depiction of people's complex and paradoxical inner worlds.

As previously mentioned, in ancient Japan circa 1000, there was a growing social atmosphere dominated by the anxiety that a world devoid of the Dharma was at hand. In considering *The Tale of Genji's* Buddhist aspects, the whole of the work makes this real world distinctly clear. Buddhist scholar Osumi affirmed that *The Tale of Genji* could not have emerged without Buddhist ideals (Osumi A 11). As such, in this novel, each time an important incident occurs, a Buddhist event is held without fail and many monks make an appearance; whenever its characters are faced with anguish or death, they constantly decide to become monks. Indeed, the entirety of *The Tale of Genji* is interspersed with Buddhist undertones. Because of this, the novel must be analysed in order to reveal the inner worlds of the Heian people, who through Buddhism tried to overcome their bitter reality and reach the afterlife's painless paradise.

3. *The Tale of Genji's* Buddhist worldview

When it comes to viewing the relationship between humans and Buddhism in *The Tale of Genji*, one must also examine Shintō, which is one of the two great religions alongside Buddhism. Shintō is unique to the Japanese people, and its followers predate the introduction of Buddhism into Japan. The Japanese embraced Buddhism on the foundation of Shintō, and even after Buddhism became firmly rooted in Japanese society, they did not abandon their indigenous beliefs, continuing to regard them devotedly. Even in *The Tale of Genji*, Buddhism and Shintō are frequently seen as coexisting in the hearts of the Heian people. The following passage is a scene in which Genji, the work's hero, prays for safe passage through tempestuous seas along with his subordinates.

'O kami [a type of Shintō God] of Sumiyoshi, your dominion embraces all these lands nearby. If you are a kami truly present here below, I beg you, lend me your aid!' His companions forgot their own troubles to grieve bitterly that such a gentleman should face so unexampled a doom. Those still somewhat in possession of their courage called out to the buddhas and kamis that they would give their lives to save their lord's. '... O Heaven and Earth, discern

where justice lies! Unjustly accused, stripped of rank and office, torn from his home to wander afar and to lament his lot dawn and dusk beneath cheerless skies, does he meet this dire fate and now face his end to atone for lives past or for crimes in this one? O kamis, O buddhas if you are wise, we beg you to grant this, our anguished prayer'!†† (258)

As seen in 'the buddhas and kamis' as well as 'O kamis, O buddhas' in the above scene, Genji and his retinue are simultaneously praying to both the Buddha and the *kami*, a kind of Shintō god. Many such scenes in the novel feature an invocation of the Buddha and a *kami*; there is no difference in meaning concerning which god is referred to first (Sueki 28–29). From this, it is clear that both Buddhism and Shintō are viewed as critical faiths in the novel. However, how was the relationship between Buddhism and Shintō perceived at the time? When considering the characteristics of the Japanese spiritual world, the concept of *shinbutsu shūgō*, or the syncretism of the *kami* and the Buddha, is frequently mentioned. This idea refers to a religious phenomenon whereby Japan's indigenous Shintō faith fuses with Buddhism to create a single religious system. This syncretic assimilation has appeared in other countries as well when different religions came into contact and created new beliefs and ideas. In Japan, however, as seen through the construction of *jingūji*—Buddhist temples within or attached to a Shintō shrine—beginning in the early 8th century, the two faiths continued to blend together for over 1000 years, creating a unique religious culture different from that of other nations (Murayama 556–557).

It is commonly accepted that the idea of *shinbutsu shūgō* was already widespread during the Heian era, and that the concept is contained in *The Tale of Genji*, which depicts the aristocratic culture of the time. In the beginning of quotation 1, Genji prays to the *kami* of Sumiyoshi, saying, 'If you are a *kami* truly present here below, I beg you, lend me your aid'!‡‡ The

†† From *The Tale of Genji* (*Genjimonogatari*, 源氏物語) as translated by Royall Tyler, with some expressions partially modified by this paper's author.

‡‡ Original Japanese language is "Makotoni ato wo tare tamafu kami naraba tasuke tamahe".

predominant number of published critiques on *The Tale of Genji* interpret this as a form of *shinbutsu shūgō*.^{§§} Buddhism's Buddha and the Bodhisattva were transformed into the diverse Shintō gods of Japan. This history of syncretism is expressed in Genji's prayer, referring to how the *kami* of Sumiyoshi was originally the Bodhisattva Kōki-Tokuō. In response, Maruyama argued that this scene should not be read as having *shinbutsu shūgō*, because the belief that the *kami* of Sumiyoshi was the incarnation of Bodhisattva Kōki-Tokuō was established after *The Tale of Genji* was written (Maruyama 170–171). Han also took up Maruyama's argument, indicating that the *kami* of Sumiyoshi that is 'present' according to Genji's prayer is one that is expected to appear and save him as 'the god that protects the sea-road' (Han 478). According to the two critics, or at least from Genji's prayer in the scene, it is impossible to view the religious life of the Heian era as a fusion of Buddhism and Shintō under a single belief system, and that its religious ideals permeated people's inner worlds.

In order to examine the Heian people's actual perceptions of Buddhism, it is crucial to analyse Shintō's inter-relationships, and there are many instances in other parts of the novel that support the perception of each of the two religions as being independent of one another. For example, Rokujō-no-miyasudokoro, who was once Genji's lover, expresses her feelings of loneliness after breaking up with him:

Her taste and flair had not deserted her, and despite her apparent loneliness she was living very pleasantly when, all at once, she fell gravely ill and sank into such despair that alarmed over her years in so sinful a place, she decided to become a Buddhist nun. (293)

'So sinful a place' in the above quote refers to the region of Ise. Rokujō-no-miyasudokoro's daughter was appointed to the role of the *saigū*, or priestess, on behalf of the emperor in dedication to the *kami* of Ise; she was appointed at Ise's Shintō shrine for a period of several years, where she was accompanied by her daughter. Women who took on the role of an Ise priestess were

^{§§} Major interpretations of Tale of Genji include *Shinpen nihon koten bungaku zenshū* (The Complete Collection of Japanese Classical Literature (New Edition)).

not allowed to believe in Buddhism while serving the *kami*; even Buddhist terms such as *hotoke* (buddha), *tō* (pagoda), *tera* (a Buddhist temple), *sō* (a Buddhist monk), and *ama* (a Buddhist nun) were not allowed to be uttered (Nakai 114). Having no choice but to live with her daughter and stay in a place disavowed from Buddhism, she considered Ise to be ‘so sinful a place’. To then wash herself of the ‘sin’, she decided to become a ‘Buddhist nun’. This scene highlights how deeply the Buddhist faith was ingrained into people’s inner worlds at the time.

The same was true of the Kamo Shintō shrine, which also severely restricted one’s devotion to Buddhism. The following is an excerpt from a scene in which Genji’s other lover, Asago, explains her relationship with him.

No, she would correspond with him sufficiently to keep in touch; giving him prudent replies, she would still converse respectably with him, and otherwise she would pursue her devotions so as to erase the sin of all those years away. It would only look capricious of her suddenly to acquiesce or to seem to want no more to do with him, and people would not fail to make much of it, being as evil-tongued as she knew them to be, and so she was formal even with her gentlewomen, cultivated strict discretion, and, meanwhile, gave herself increasingly to her devotions. (371–372)

‘The sin of all those years’ in the above quote refers to the prohibition of all Buddhist events as well as devotion to Buddhism during the time Asagao was serving as a *saiin*, a *kamo* priestess, at the Kamo Shintō shrine. She also ‘gave herself increasingly to her devotions’ to wash herself of the ‘sin’ of her time away from Buddhism.

The analysis of *The Tale of Genji* above shows the difficulty in saying that the Heian people recognised *shinbutsu shūgō* as a religious practice in real life. Buddhism and Shintō, as independent faiths that are at times coexistent and at others opposing, became the religions of people during the Heian period. More importantly, when praying for the well-being and happiness of the world, the two religions are both regarded as objects of their faith, as seen in Quotation 1 when Genji and his party pray to avoid potential dangers. For example, they refer to

'the buddhas and *kamis*' and cry out 'O *kamis*, O buddhas', although the only one under which he feels a guilty conscience is Buddhism, and he dedicates himself to Buddhism to wash away his sins.

This is not just limited to the scenes where the characters perceive themselves as guilty, such as Rokuj--no-miyasudokoro and Asagao, but also where the characters claim their innocence. For example, Genji falls in love with a woman named Oborozukiyo, who, in fact, was engaged to Genji's half-brother and heir to the throne. When Genji is rumored to have an affair with his brother's fiancé, he predicts both political and social trouble ahead, and voluntarily leaves the city to exile in a deserted, secluded place. The next scene portrays Genji taking leave of the people he was close to.

They say that whatever happens to us is our reward from past lives, which means in short that everything springs from my own failings, 'Genji answered. "I gather that in the other realm, too, it is considered quite wrong for anyone whom a small lapse has earned his Sovereign's displeasure to live as do the just, even if he has not exile – for I hear one has been taken – only shows how exceptional an offense is imputed to me. I dare not ignore such censure merely because my heart is pure, and I have therefore resolved to remove myself from the world before I face still greater dishonor." He sent on at some length in this vein.

His Excellency said" ... Yes, it is all destiny, and many in other lands have suffered like you. They, however, were victims of slander. No, to me, all this is simply inconceivable." He spoke for a long time. (230-231)

Genji pleads his innocence saying, "My heart is pure." However, he explains that the reason for his departure is due to the others' gaze. His Excellency, who was listening to him, also believes his argument and resents this reality in which he is criticized for being guilty. There is no negative description of the relationship between Genji and Oborozukiyo even after this scene in *The Tale of Genji*. These expressions seem to be defending their relationship and this continues during his exile. Genji does not express any guilt regarding the incident, and no other characters seem to blame him. Contrary to the ostensible lines of these characters, Genji spends days reciting Buddhist scriptures in exile. "Over soft

white silk twill and aster he wore a dress cloak of deep blue, its sash only very casually tied. And his voice slowly chanting “I, a disciple of the Buddha Shakyamuni ...” was more beautiful than any they had ever heard before (245).

Although there is no direct expression that shows Genji realizing his sins and wanting atonement, he is portrayed as still reciting the Buddhist scriptures intently during exile. This shows *The Tale of Genji*'s religious worldview where even guilt sprouting from the subconscious is healed through Buddhist practice.

In examining how guilt arises from the sense of ethics latent in people's inner worlds, it is possible to see how the Heian people's religious ethics sprouted from Buddhism rather than Shintō. Another important point to review is how the consideration of not having lived a Buddhist life as a 'sin' implies a premonition of death due to a major illness (as seen in Quotation 2) in which Rokujō-no-miyasudokoro “[falls] gravely ill”. This is because, when humans are met with an insurmountable difficulty, they eventually cling to the religion that dominates their inner worlds, and look back on themselves to see if they are ashamed in light of their sense of religious ethics. This once again attests to how firmly Buddhism operated as a foundation for religious ethical conscience among the Heian people.

4. Buddhism and one's sense of ethics

When the characters of *The Tale of Genji* are faced with death, they reflect on their lives and express their guilt in light of a Buddhist ethical conscience. This is because they unconditionally believe in Buddhist tenets in the three worlds, and claim that there is a past life before one's birth and a future life after death in addition to the current one. In particular, unlike Shintō, Buddhism exclusively addresses issues related to the afterlife (Mitsuhashi 358–359). As for ancient Japanese religious aspects like these, Nakai argued that Shintō is less universal because it is a faith created upon the connection of each clan with the *kami*, while Buddhism has permeated into state protection, clan prosperity, and the problem of the human mind due to its universality (Nakai 114). Buddhism became deeply connected with human psychological activity in terms of believing that death is both the

problem that humans most fear and the problem that no one can overcome.

What thoughts and processes did the Heian people use to serve the Buddha and become monks? The following is a scene in which Genji's most beloved woman, Murasaki-no-ue, offers many prayers for the next life after falling gravely ill.

Lady Murasaki's health remained very poor after her serious illness, and she had suffered ever since from a vague, lingering malaise...She commissioned many holy services for her own good in her next life, and she often asked to become what she still wished to be, so that she could give the little time she had left entirely to her devotions, but he refused...She resented his refusal because it would obviously be too unkind and contrary of her to act on her own, without his permission, but she also feared that she might owe it to her own burden of sins. She hastened to dedicate the thousand copies of the Lotus Sutra that she herself had made over the years...She gave the seven monks vestments suitable for their ranks, all extremely beautiful in colour and finish. The event to celebrate them was very grand in every way. She had never told him that it was to be so solemn, and so he had offered her no particular advice. The excellence of her judgement and even her knowledge of Buddhist things impressed him profoundly, and his only role was to look after quite ordinary matters of altar adornment and so on. (755-756)

'What she still wished to be' from the above passage is a typical expression used when a character in *The Tale of Genji* wants to become a Buddhist monk. Although Murasaki-no-ue has a premonition about her approaching death due to a serious illness and begs her husband Genji several times to allow her to become a nun, he refuses. While she is disappointed and resentful at his opposition, on the other hand, she resigns herself to thinking that she cannot become a nun because of 'her own burden of sins'. In other words, because she committed a sin in her past life, she must atone for it in the current one by not being able to become a nun.

As seen from the expression that one cannot become a monk because of sins committed in a previous life, *The Tale of Genji* takes on the sins of humanity as a very important theme and portrays the range of sins in a variety of ways. In this work, there are diverse Japanese terms meaning 'sin', the most common of

which is *tsumi*, which is used 186 times (Harimoto 281), and it appears around 100 times in a Buddhist context. In considering its usage, love between men and women or love for one's children is not considered a sin in general human life, but is addressed as a sin if it were to hinder one's devotion to Buddhist teachings (Shigematsu 24). This usage of *tsumi* demonstrates how deeply *The Tale of Genji* deals with human sin and how much those sins measure judgement under a Buddhist sense of ethics.

The highly sensitive guilty conscience under Buddhism, seen as such in *The Tale of Genji*, displays people's strong will to reach paradise through atonement. However, the problem is that, out of the characters who felt guilty under Buddhist values – and, in order to wash away their sins, performed Buddhist works or became monks/nuns – not a single one is portrayed as having reached paradise. On the contrary, many characters appear to be in distress in the afterlife, despite having become monks or nuns. The next section will analyse why there is such a point of contradiction in *The Tale of Genji*. Was it written under the absolute authority of Buddhism?

5. Conclusion

In *The Tale of Genji*, the inner lives of people during the Heian era are vividly portrayed, revealing that characters facing anguish or death often turn to Buddhist practices, becoming monks or nuns to alleviate their suffering. However, the novel notably lacks idealized Buddhist figures. Many major characters who seek refuge in monastic life due to their suffering, such as Rokujō-nomiyasudokoro as mentioned earlier, are depicted as tormented in the afterlife, suggesting that their escape from agony is not rewarded with paradise. Similarly, Fujitsubo, despite becoming a nun, suffers after death, illustrating that in *The Tale of Genji*, embracing Buddhism does not guarantee entry into paradise.

Characters in *The Tale of Genji*, despite becoming monks or nuns, hesitate to fully detach from society or to embrace the uncertainties of the afterlife, reflecting a nuanced perception of Buddhism prevalent among the Heian people as they approached the twilight of the Buddhist era. According to Sueki, characters in *The Tale of Genji* never embody ideal Buddhist virtues, attributing

this to their portrayal as reflecting the aristocratic lives of the time (Sueki 16).

Scholars have also examined the extent of Buddhism's influence during the Heian era, the use of Buddhist phrases within the text, and how subsequent generations have interpreted these aspects in their own lives. However, literary works do not always directly portray human psychology or social phenomena. Even when characters in the novel express profound respect and belief in Buddha, hoping for salvation, their faith is not necessarily absolute, as is common across all religious beliefs. Like all humans, they turn to religion seeking solace from life's suffering and aiming for a tranquil afterlife. Yet, inherent in human nature is an ongoing struggle with anxiety and self-doubt until absolute faith is attained. The Buddhist undertones in *The Tale of Genji* vividly depict this complex human psychology. This analysis reveals the ambivalence inherent in human beings as they navigate the pursuit of a religious life, grappling with their desires for spiritual peace alongside their uncertainties and inner conflicts.

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